

Reflections

Filling the gap or taking the lead? Refugee led organisations in Uganda

KELUEL AGOOK, KUOL AROU, SIHAM AHMED, JOYEUX MUGISHO, SIMON MAROT TOULOUNG & HILDE REFSTIE (EDITING SUPPORT)



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Authored by refugee leaders in Uganda for Fennia's special issue on humanitarian localisation and accountability, this reflection asserts that our voices must be heard wherever displacement is analysed and policy is set. Nothing about us without us. Refugee-Led Organisations are not only first responders. We are educators, health promoters, peacebuilders and advocates. Our initiatives reach communities sooner, cost less and carries trust that international programmes rarely match. In this piece we argue that what we lack is not another training manual but the resources and authority that match with the responsibilities we already shoulder. This is needed if the humanitarian localisation agenda is to be anything more than a slogan.

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Keluel Agook, Kuol Arou, Refugee Led Organisation Network (RELON Uganda).

E-mail: keluel@relonuganda.org, kuol@relonuganda.org

Siham Ahmed, Somali Women Union Uganda.

E-mail: somaliwomenu4@gmail.com

Joyeux Mugisho, People for Peace and Defense of Rights Uganda (PPDR).

E-mail: joyeuxppdr@gmail.com

Simon Marot Touloung, African Youth Action Network (AYAN).

E-mail: touloung45@gmail.com

Hilde Refstie, Department of Geography and Social Anthropology, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. E-mail: hilde.refstie@ntnu.no

Nothing for us without us

When a small group of refugees gathered in Kampala in May 2016, our frustration was simple: assistance was being designed for us but almost never with us. Out of that frustration we created the Refugee-Led Organisation Network — RELON — to advocate that refugees must be seen as full-fledged actors in humanitarian response. Nine years later more than fifty refugee-led organisations

(RLOs) across Uganda exchange information, pool scarce resources and form a voice in local and national policy arenas. The slogan that guided us at the start still sums up our ambition: “Nothing for us, without us.”¹ This reflection piece is written by us, representatives for organisations under RELON.

Rooted response in practice

Uganda’s Comprehensive Refugee Framework allows refugees to move freely, work legally and register civil society groups. Those policies have opened space for a landscape of RLOs that is as diverse as the settlements themselves. Some of us run community savings-and-loan schemes that keep families from relying on high-interest lenders. Others deliver short vocational courses — welding, tailoring, coding — that translate directly into income. In settlements where trauma runs deep, peer-counsellors provide low-cost mental-health support in languages newcomers actually speak, while farmers’ cooperatives experiment with drought-tolerant crops to tackle chronic food insecurity.²

Because we live where we work, programmes can be adapted overnight. When a tailoring class in Bidi Bidi proved too expensive for single mothers to attend, the RLO running it shifted to shorter evening sessions and provided child-care on-site. No international consultant had to be flown in; decisions were taken under a tree after dusk, and classes resumed the following week. Such responsiveness is possible only because RLO leaders are embedded in the everyday rhythms of the settlements (Gitahi 2023).

In our organisations, we look for people who already command trust — women who run popular kiosks, youth who organise sports leagues, elders whose conflict-mediation skills are recognised across ethnic lines — and equip them to mentor others. In RELON’s ‘training-of-trainers’ initiative for example, trainers learn to advocate for the rights and well-being of refugees in their respective communities and to facilitate the implementation of advocacy initiatives that directly address the concerns and aspirations of refugees. Each graduate commits to training at least five peers when they return home. The multiplier effect is decisive in spreading locally shaped solutions from one corner of the country to another.

Financing refugee led assistance

The global localisation agenda promised that at least one quarter of humanitarian funding would reach national and local actors. For RLOs the results have been mixed (Metcalf-Hough *et al.* 2022). In Uganda, where we are allowed to register formally, some groups have secured direct grants or served as lead partners for international agencies. In many neighbouring countries, RLOs are blocked from even opening a bank account, which puts the promise of localisation out of reach from the start. As written previously by one of the authors of this intervention piece:

“When it comes to localisation and the support INGOs provide to refugees, it seems like people in the aid community are claiming they want me to be independent and empowered even while continuing to make me depend on them for my daily meal (Mugisho 2023).

When money does not flow directly to refugee-run groups the usual explanation is ‘limited capacity’. Yet capacity is not the problem; inappropriate systems are. Reporting templates designed for multimillion-dollar organisations assume professional accountants, fibre-optic internet and dedicated grant managers. Small RLOs often rely on volunteers who file receipts via WhatsApp and keep ledgers on a shared laptop. We have demonstrated — repeatedly — that when forms are simplified and timelines are realistic we can meet every accountability standard. What we cannot do is mimic the overhead structures of large INGOs without starving the very programmes donors want to fund.

As illustrated by for instance the Somali Women Union Uganda, its members see accountability first and foremost as a duty to the women they live among every day. They have formalised enough to satisfy auditors, yet they refuse to let administration overshadow action. Their experience reminds us that not every RLO must become a miniature version of an international NGO. Smaller, unregistered initiatives — especially those serving minority or hard-to-reach groups—often achieve the greatest impact precisely because they are lean and deeply trusted. A genuine localisation agenda must

therefore match funding models to the diverse shapes and sizes of RLOs rather than forcing all of us into one bureaucratic mould.

Some donors are showing how this can work. The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the European Programme for Integration and Migration, the Open Society Foundations, the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Government of Switzerland have all channelled resources directly to RLOs or through flexible intermediaries, experimenting with multilingual portals, proportional reporting requirements and shared due-diligence 'passports' so that a single compliance check is not repeated for every grant (Sturridge et al. 2023; Reidy 2024). These steps save money, reduce administrative fatigue and, more importantly, leave time for the face-to-face accountability activities that our workers do in their communities through meetings, information flows and everyday interactions. We urge other funders to adopt similar measures and to extend them to unregistered groups through trusted third-party hosts when national legislation blocks direct transfers.

We acknowledge that refugee-run groups are not immune to the temptations of nepotism or petty corruption. Our answer is to open the books to the communities we serve. Budgets are posted publicly; community meetings are called whenever a project changes direction; WhatsApp groups circulate real-time expenditure updates; and feedback mechanisms allow neighbours to challenge decisions without fear of reprisals. Because our reputations are built over years — not the length of a contract — social pressure is a powerful corrective. In practice these home-grown checks often catch problems faster than external audits.

It is relevant to note that accountability is not guaranteed within the international, professionalised humanitarian sector either. One is that corruption scandals seem to persist. Another is that despite frequent acknowledgments of its importance — especially within the localisation agenda — we refugees often remain unheard and excluded from decision-making spaces where priorities are set and resources allocated. We are still absent from visa lists, speaker rosters, and voting tables.

When the doors stay closed

Even when RLOs succeed locally, structural barriers can silence us globally. In December 2023, a number of us were scheduled to go to the World Refugee Forum in Geneva, which was co-hosted by the Ugandan authorities. In the end, most of us were denied visas to enter the capital of international humanitarian efforts. If decision-making spaces remain physically and politically inaccessible to refugees, localisation will continue to be more slogan than reality. Either visas must be granted, or the venues of high-level dialogue must shift closer to where refugees actually live and work.

Research presents a parallel challenge. Uganda is one of the most studied humanitarian contexts in the world, yet refugees are still too often treated as data sources rather than co-authors of knowledge. Equitable, long-term collaborations — where refugees help shape research questions, participate in data collection and interpretation, and share in authorship — are essential for producing studies that reflect lived realities. Such collaborations are also critical for advocating policy change and bridging the gap between humanitarian localisation agendas and their implementation.

What it takes

Localisation is ultimately about power: who decides what is needed, who designs the response and who is held to account when intentions fail. In Uganda refugees are already exercising that power daily through savings groups, vocational schools, mental-health circles, sustainable farming plots and digital-access hubs. Direct, flexible funding and genuine seats at policy tables would allow these efforts to scale without losing their rootedness.

We do not ask to be invited as mascots or consulted as an afterthought. We ask that the global humanitarian system recognise what is already happening on the ground and align its structures accordingly. Equity, dignity and practical effectiveness all point in the same direction: nothing for us without us, and increasingly, nothing about us without us either.

Notes

¹ See also <https://reلونuganda.org/>

² See also the film Filling the Gap or Taking the Lead? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adgz9l0FpEA>

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